

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 23 February 2012

Report compiled by Darwin Alvarez



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader:	Darwin Alvarez	Local Guide
Cachalote Crew	Douglas	Captain
	Richard	Bartender
	Segundo	Cook
	Lenis	Engineer
	Miguel	Helmsman
	Roberto	Sailor
Mainland Personne Guide	Raul Miranda	
Transfer out GPS islands	Montserrat Rodriguez	
Drivers	William Miranda, Iván Tarapuez & Marco Valencia	
Participants:	James Brown	
	Janice Brown	
	Sarah Jane Eastman	
	Paola Eastman Gardner	
	Liz Gower	
	Peter Gower	
	Janet Shearn	
	Anita Sawyer	
	Martin Robinson	
	John Myers	
	Hilary Smith	
	Peter Smith	
	Michael Peacock	
	Valerie Peacock	
	Rosalind Everett	
David Everett		

Day 1

Monday 6th February

On the arrival at the international airport Mariscal Sucre in Quito we waited for the flight which was on time, then drove to the hotel Dan Carlton where we passed the night in preparation for the start of our adventure in this wonderful city (declared by UNESCO as a Cultural World Heritage site in 1979).

Day 2

Tuesday 7th February

QUITO

At 9am Raul, the local guide came to pick us up, to go to the colonial part of Quito towards the south.

Our first stop was La Basílica el Voto National Church - one of the gothic architectural styles that came to the fore in the 19th Century. Other marvellous places were the Monastery of El Carmen de la Santísima Trinidad, Metropolitan Cathedral, Church of La Compañía, Plaza Grande and San Francisco Square. At the end we went to El Panecillo (meaning little bread) which is also a historical site and at a view point from here it is possible to see the north and south part of Quito if weather conditions allow.

Day 3

Wednesday 8th February

GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

There are very few places on earth like these; Galapagos Islands are located about 1000 km from South America, stranded by Equator, a land of unimaginable creatures and a unique geological landscape. Our adventure started early in the morning from the Dan Carlton Hotel, our luggage was ready for departing at 6:40, the bus was on time and after 15 minutes we got to the airport. Galapagos is a very fragile ecosystem that is why the Galapagos Quarantine and Inspection System was created, in order to avoid alien plants and animals that could threaten this precious world. We got our luggage tags and boarding passes, and were ready to start our great adventure. The flight was on time, and after 2 ½ hours with a stop in Guayaquil we arrived to Baltra Island about 10:30am. From Baltra Island it is possible to see Santa Cruz Island which was quite clear in terms of visibility. Only five minutes on a bus and 10 minutes on a ferry we arrived on the island.

During our 20 minute bus ride at an altitude of 500 meters above sea level we visited Primicias Farm seeing along the road the icons of the Galapagos Islands - the Giant Tortoises - Santa Cruz Island houses the largest of all... It was time to move to the lowlands on the southern part of the island. We arrived at Puerto Ayora for lunch at la Garrapata restaurant. As part of our itinerary we visited the best tortoise centre in the Galapagos, named after a park warden who dedicates his entire life to save them 'Fausto Llerena'. More than a thousand of these incredible creatures are cared for with the purpose of repatriating them. Lonesome George the only tortoise surviving from Pinta Island is kept here in captivity and for many years we tried to reproduce him in captivity with no success because no females of the same species have been found, but closest relatives genetically have been placed into the same corral. So far there are four species of giant tortoises which are considered as endangered. They are breeding with a tremendous success so 90% are expected to survive when they are repatriated to their natural environment.

[Note: Lonesome George died at the end of June 2012 aged approx 100 years. The Pinta Island Giant Tortoise is now extinct...]

We had a quick walk in the town and then we were welcomed by the crew who were waiting for us on board. After some instructions Darwin our guide gave us our cabin assignments. We proceeded to our cabins, and the luggage was already there. In a few minutes dinner was announced by a bell ringing. After dinner Darwin briefed us about important details of safety and then the next day schedule.

Day 4

Thursday 9th February

South Plaza Island is the oldest island, the lava has got a geological age of 4.2 million years by potassium argon dating, and the trail around the island shows that in the past it was under water. Coral reef remnants among the boulders (pillow lava) still exist here.

The north coast is occupied by one of the most successful and abundant Sea Lion breeding colonies, where several males side by side patrol their territories, protecting females and babies from intruders and predators. We walked towards the eroded south part, the arid zone offers us a curious and unusual cactus forest, and the reddish tinge of the succulent ice plant (known as carpet weed - *Sesuvium endmonstonei*) attracted our curiosity. This 0.13 square kilometre island is a laboratory of evolution, and Marine and Land Iguanas hybridize here.

The cliff made by constant erosion of waves and the prevailing wind blowing from the south east, is a suitable nesting site for a variety of sea birds like Shearwaters, Swallow Tailed Gulls, and Red Billed Tropicbirds which frequently glide around thanks to the thermals, and some Blue footed and Nazca Boobies were sighted. Once completing the loop there were migrant birds like Ruddy Turnstones and Wandering Tattlers.

Afterwards we departed for 2 hours sailing towards our next destination; and from the sun deck we saw Manta Rays splashing in order to reduce parasites. The anchorage site in Santa Fe Island is really peaceful; the air temperature is 35⁰C, so the water was inviting us for the first snorkelling experience. Sea Lions, Parrot fish, Yellow Tail Mulletts, stingrays and hundreds of Surgeon fish joined us and suddenly Green Turtles were included in our party. Some people participated in a panga ride along the coast, they mentioned seeing sea birds, iguanas, turtles, sharks, and several species of ray.

The heat obliged us to start our hike at 4pm. Baby Sea Lions were seen with their mothers on the first coral sandy beach we landed at. We then went for a walk in search of the endemic Santa Fe Island iguana a very strange creature which is different from the other species in colour and size. The lack of fresh water means the vegetation has a grey tinge, and amongst the vegetation were lots of cactae species. After 700 m walk we were ready to return to the boat for a panga ride where we spotted Eagle Rays before making our way back on board.

Day 5

Friday 10th February

Cerro Brujo on San Cristobal Island is the remains of a tuff cone which erupted in the open sea, and in the latter evolution of this cone, it contained a small lava lake. It has been eroded by rain and wind and the sea and recently by feral goats. The lava flow behind the cone is the-aa type, very fragile and razor sharp. On visiting the coralline sandy beach, very rich in calcium carbonate, little crabs were intimidated by our passage, still 10 m from them they hid in their shelters immediately. Sand dunes are nesting sites for Green Turtles so many depressions undulate the upper part of the beach. The second species of mocking bird confined just to this island (*Nesomimus melanonis*) woke our interest in discovering more species of smaller land birds, and we were delighted to find some Darwin finches - Small and Medium Ground Finches.

The lagoon right behind the sand dunes was a salt mine exploited by ancient colonizers, and now is a suitable habitat for Common Stilts, Ruddy Turnstones, Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings and White cheeked Pintails. Bordering the lagoon halophytes (plants that tolerate salinity) give a green tinge to the area – we found sea grape (*Scaevola plumieri*), white and black mangroves, carpet weed, beach drop seed (*Sporobolus virginicus*) and further on the arid zone, pioneering on the lava fields, were cactae, *Scalecia divisa*, Galapagos Croton and Palo Santo trees.

Snorkelling off the beach was the best option for some of our guests to start practicing and gaining more confidence, and young Sea Lions were encouraging snorkelers to follow them.

We left the beach and after a quick shower during navigation we arrived at the oldest tuff cone in the Galapagos; Kicker Rock is a small eroded tuff located three nautical miles from the main island, there is an extraordinary geological landscape rising 140 meters above sea level, where frigatebirds sp, and Nazca and Blue Footed Boobies nest.

At 2pm we were at the easternmost Galapagos island of San Cristobal. We start a bus riding from the political capital Puerto Baquerizo Moreno and we reached in 30 minutes 'Fausto Gordillo Breeding Centre' the most recent program of breeding tortoises in captivity created in 2002. The tortoises here were unlike those in Santa Cruz Island. The shell in the front part was partially modified, an evolutionary reaction caused by the food resources. Mockingbirds, Small Ground Finches, Small Tree Finch, and a couple of Warbler Finches were sighted.

El Junco Lagoon volcanically called Maar is a type of volcano formed by shallow explosive eruptions due to the interaction of invading magma into the ground water table. It is the only permanent resource of fresh water in Galapagos! It is a crater that during the last ice age a 50 foot thick layer of sediment was deposited making this an impermeable lagoon capable of keeping rain water in over the long term. The name of the lagoon is after a plant locally known as El Junco (*Eleocharis mutata*). Besides White-cheeked Pintails, Moorhens were diving for food. Back at the town some people were interested in a short walk around the town. After dinner we set sail to Gardner Bay on Espanola.

Day 6

Saturday 11th February

Espanola named after the country of Spain, is so isolated and one of the oldest in geological terms but it is essentially gorgeous and is now one of the best tourist attractions. The beach of Gardner Bay was our landing spot in the morning, where a large colony of Sea Lions welcomed us. Ornithologists prepared their cameras to record the three species of Darwin's finches, some people decided to explore the beach on their own, and others came along with me. On the beach the endemic mockingbirds (*Nesomimus magdonaldi*) were seen, and at the end of the beach we saw Red Marine Iguanas, and flying very high above us there was a Galapagos Hawk soaring in circles - possibly searching for an American Oystercatcher nesting site nearby.

It was hot and humid so everybody got back on board and prepared for a refreshing snorkel near to Gardner Island. Water visibility was so clear and it was very easy for all participants to spot and recognize a wide range of fish such as: Yellow-tailed Surgeonfish, Blue Chin Parrotfish, Cornet Fish, Trumpet Fish, Porcupine Puffer fish, Guinea fowl Pufferfish, Stingrays, and lots of sea stars were feeding on the detritus. Back on board after the shower people were questioning and checking an identification book to have a better idea about what we had seen.

In the afternoon we disembarked and there were hundreds of iguanas, mockingbirds, Galapagos Doves, and Darwin's Finches as well. Espanola Island is also home to the largest lava lizards as well. Walking along the coast we saw the Nazca Booby nesting colony, some Waved Albatrosses, and the blow hole. Plants here included Muyuyo (Yellow cordial), Galapagos licium, Galapagos Croton, Salt Bush, and Carpet Weed. We returned to the boat for a 5 hour crossing tonight to Floreana Island.

Day 7

Sunday 12th February

Floreana is the most southern of the islands; a large scenic lagoon here is inhabited by flamingos, White-cheeked Pintails, and migrant shore birds. The famous Post Office Bay is also on this island – this is where a barrel is set up for visitors to put mail which is distributed personally by other tourists. We visited the beach at Devil's Crown; made up of ground coral, Devil's Crown is an eroded crater near to the main island, one of the favourite snorkelling sites, here marine currents produce rich upwelling attracting enormous amounts of fish, including White-tipped Reef harks. Cormorant Point is a site with Black and White mangroves, Salt Bush, and Lather Leave bushes around a lagoon which is a suitable nesting site for flamingos. We also saw lots of Green Turtles as the sand dunes here are suitable for nesting, and on the way back we saw some Small Ground Finches as well.

We went back on board for lunch and in the afternoon visited Post Office Bay. After that we looked at a lava tube that starts 35 metres above sea level and ends at the sea level underground! We spent time either swimming, snorkelling or walking, and returned on board to set off for Cerro Dragon on Santa Cruz Island. On the sun deck were Red Necked Phalaropes, Galapagos Petrels and Galapagos Shearwaters.

Day 8

Monday 13th February

Landing at 8am on Santa Cruz Island it was already sunny but because we wanted to see the Land Iguanas we programmed the visit at this time. The majority of cactae in this region are quite young, and a very healthy population of Palo Santo or Incense Trees dominate. The brackish lagoon attracts flamingos, Black-necked Stilts, Lesser Yellow Legs, Grey Plovers, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Plovers. We walked around to find Land Iguanas (*Conolophus subcristatus*), and after two and a half hours of hiking we were back at the boat. Our next destination was to Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island where we went snorkelling and saw White-tipped Reef Sharks, Stingrays, and even some Galapagos Penguins. *Mollugo flavences*, Lava Cactus is practically the only plant that exists here. Painted Locusts and Lava Lizards were also seen. We travelled overnight towards the paradise of birds heading northeast to the shield volcano called Genovesa Island (also called Tower Island).

Day 9

Tuesday 14th February

One of the most pristine and least-visited islands in this exotic archipelago, Genovesa is the essence of how the islands were before humans' colonization. Quite early in the morning before sunrise Peter was on the main deck searching for the first sea birds around. We programmed the visit earlier considering the best time to record Short Eared Owls. We disembarked at Prince Philip's Steps (The Cliff). Red footed Boobies only nest here naturally, and there were also Great Frigatebirds and Nazca Boobies haphazardly making their way among us. Land birds started to show off, including Galapagos Doves - a species that pairs for life. Four species of Darwin's finches occur here - we saw the Sharp Beaked Ground, Large Ground and Large Cactus Finches, unfortunately we missed the Warbler Finch. The southern part of the island is a very good habitat for Wedged-Rumped Storm Petrels and Madeiran Storm Petrels. Short Eared Owls prey on them and we spotted an owl two hundred metres in the distance, quite well camouflaged with the lava terrain. It was getting darker, and we thought it may rain, so we decided to go back for a panga ride along the cliffs, seeing both Galapagos Sea Lions, and Galapagos Fur Seals - the largest resident mammals on the islands – they were perched on shelves on the steep wall.

The smallest Marine Iguanas in the Galapagos were difficult to distinguish because of their perfect camouflage. Swallow-tailed Gulls were feeding their young and Red-bellied Tropicbirds were nesting on open sections between lava layers. Later on we started snorkelling activities along the cliff where Sea Lions and Fur Seals joined us; and very colourful fish appeared like King Angelfish, Parrot fish, Puffers, Damselfish, and Moorish Idols. During the afternoon four participants decided kayak which is another of the activities allowed by the National Park on this visitor site, the place is usually very calm making this activity very safe and enjoyable even for beginners.

In order to avoid the hot sun we disembarked around 3:45pm in Darwin's Bay. There is no place like this - the sound of thousands of birds was everywhere. We were exploring tidal pools and then an octopus appeared! It was burrowing and searching for little crabs, some mullets, wrasses, and blennies which are trapped in this shallow water. Along the trail many more birds were seen and all so tame! Lava Morning Glory, Palo Santo, Yellow Cordias, and very prostrate Opuntias (Paddle Cactuses) occur here - they evolved like this because there are no herbivores in Genovesa. At 6:15 we come back on board to start sailing towards Santa Cruz Island.

Day 10

Wednesday 15th February

From the town of Puerto Ayora, it was possible to see the highlands quite clearly this morning, and we were looking forward to this spectacular visit. The goal was to visit the highest point on the island, and conditions today were great. Because of the long distance we prepared to stay out all day with a boxed lunch.

A conservation program is managed by the National Park wardens here in order to preserve the Miconia plant which is emblematic of this ecological zone, and which is unfortunately seriously threatened by the Quinine tree. Ironically this plant was introduced with the purpose of curing malaria but this disease never occurred on the islands!

The landscape was perfect to record small land birds specially tree finches, and here we recorded a Woodpecker Finch. Yellow Warblers are so abundant here as well. Some people ventured all the way to the end towards the volcano and some even decided to climb all the way up to the top. Once at the top we had an extraordinary view. The altitude here is about 700 metres above sea level and the communities are dominated by the *Melastomataceae* "*Miconia robinsoniana*". After our walk we took a long rest on board.

Day 11

Thursday 16th February

We arrived in the early morning to a typical cinder cone, where our first excursion started on the northern side of the island. We landed on a coralline sandy beach in calm seas. On the walk we saw some plant species of this area, such as Puncture weed, Galapagos Tomato, Chamaesyce sp, Galapagos Carpetweed, Boerhaavia; where there is little animal life except mainly Lava Lizards, Small Ground Finches and Grasshoppers. On the shore a nursery of Sea Lions were in shallow tidal pools all protected by a beach master and a couple of females. Once on the southern coast of Sombrero Chino we had a spectacular view of some islands, one of them captured the attention because of its name; Sin Nombre (Nameless island)!

Marine Iguanas struggle during this time of the year because of the lack of food. The most adaptable with a deep breath have to dive to a depth of 15 metres for more than 20 minutes in order to get some algae, however others feed on salt tolerant plants but unfortunately this is not well digested.

Close to the main island we stopped to take pictures of the prominent Candelabra Cactus, and after that a flock of tiny penguins showed off.... Appetizers were served once we got back on board and later we enjoyed a panga ride and snorkelling or swimming just off the beach. There was extremely good visibility and we had Sea Lions playing around us, and parrotfish, puffers, damselfish, surgeonfish, white tipped reef sharks were some of the most common species to join us.

Lunch was served and we sailed an hour and a half to Rabida Island. At 2pm we renewed our activities - so a wonderful red sand beach was the next place for swimming, snorkelling, and relaxation. Some decided to jump from the panga a little bit further where we had spectacular snorkelling since - we saw Scorpion Fish, Garden Snake Eel, Hieroglyphic Hawk Fish, Lizard Fish, and a variety of invertebrates; corals, sea urchins, sea stars, anemones, lobsters, and so on.

A rain shower made us change our landing time to 10 minutes later, but it soon stopped and fortunately we had the best light and weather in the end. Right before disembarking a flock of shearwaters were on a feeding frenzy which captured our attention. Once on land all the Darwin's Finches species occurring here were recorded in addition to mockingbirds, doves, Galapagos Flycatchers, and even a Vermilion Flycatcher (quite rare here) appeared on the shore beside Wandering Tattlers and Oystercatchers. The sea was totally calm like a swimming pool so the captain decided to sail towards our next destination - Isabela Island.

Day 12

Friday 17th February

The best time to visit Sierra Negra volcano was during the early morning because of the weather so all participants agreed to disembark just after breakfast to take advantage of these conditions. From the anchorage site it was possible to see the mountain totally clearly so we landed at 6:30am and after 40 minutes riding in a local bus we reached the car park (El Cura). Enthusiastically everyone started the hike towards the summit and on the way Darwin's Finches, Vermilion Flycatchers, Galapagos Flycatchers, and Dark-billed Cuckoos were spotted. First we saw the rim of the largest Galapagos caldera after the first hours hiking, and one by one we approached the edge of this immense shallow depression, steam everywhere, with very active fumaroles. We continued walking the next 5 km to reach Volcan Chico (little volcano). Weather is definitely difficult to forecast, and sunshine rapidly disappeared and what was brilliant soon became dark, and rain surprised us as we were descending to the lava field. We stopped to prepare our rain jackets and water proof- protection for our cameras and binoculars. We decided to continue and walked around the volcanic vents to feel the temperature change. As we approached the steam the thermometer reached 45⁰C however the average temperature around was 18⁰ C.

On the return trip the weather improved and an astonishing landscape was revealed on the northern side of Isabela Island, the view of the most of the explosive of all volcanoes "Alcedo a great colossus". Sierra Negra volcano really fulfilled our expectations already, but in terms of birds the Galapagos Martin was the new bird for our check list. On the way back we saw more Vermilion Flycatchers, Woodpecker Finches, Warblers, Galapagos Rails, and Whimbrels.

We had a brief visit to the Tortoise Breeding Centre Arnaldo Tupiza, established here since 1979 to recover the endangered species of Sierra Negra and Cerro Azul Volcanoes. We got back on board for lunch and a siesta and relaxed in the afternoon ready for the next days adventure on the west coast of Isabela Island.

Day 13

Saturday 18th February

A 3,000 year old barren volcanic lava terrain was the next scenery we were invited to explore. On the way the very few plant species showed us their extraordinary adaptation to the lack of soil and water and especially the scorching sun; Lava Cactus and Candelabra Cactus are the two endemic genus in the *Cactaceae* family, and Radiate Headed Scaecia, Lance leafed Darwin's Shrub, and Galapagos Rose Mary are all endemic as a genus as well. On this very unstable terrain the presence of collapsed areas create a very healthy habitat for plants like Junca Grass, Poison Apple, Palo Santo Trees, Thorn Shrub and Beach Drop Seed due to the brackish water (a mixture of salty and fresh water) that exists here. Waders love this oasis. The Northern Shoveler duck was a new record even possibly for the Galapagos!

We had a panga ride along the coast to see the largest of the marine iguanas reported on the western part of Isabela, in addition Galapagos Penguins, Blue footed Boobies, Flightless Cormorants, and Lava Herons were spotted.

On board as soon as we arrived we started preparing for snorkelling activities, and in spite of the murky water, we were delighted to see marine turtles, cormorants, balloon pufferfish, pacific halfbeak, Creole fish and sea horses. I was very impressed with the 23⁰C water temperature, something unusual in this part of the archipelago. The water in here is regularly cold even during the hot season due to the submarine counter current Cromwell which produces cold water.

On Elizabeth Bay there is no landing site, a panga ride is the only activity we are allowed to carry out. We disembark around 4pm to explore this peaceful cove where a variety of species shelters. Penguins were feeding and one Spotted Eagle Ray and a Porcupine Puffer Fish called our attention. There were also Laughing Gulls, Franklin's Gulls, Pelicans, Lava and Striated Herons as we made our way back once again.

Day 14

Sunday 19th February

Urbina Bay is possibly the only of the visitor sites where visitors can see Giant Tortoises in the wild; they are here because there is no enough room for all to nest on the highlands of Alcedo Volcano. They compete for territory and nesting sites and the losers are practically those we can see here. The only place where the tortoises nest in the caldera is on Alcedo caldera because of the heat generated by fumaroles. The eggs successfully hatch with no maternal care after four months of incubation.

We were not disappointed and we saw everything we planned; Land and Marine Iguanas, Giant Tortoises, Galapagos Hawks, Galapagos Flycatchers, Yellow Warblers, Darwin's Finches and so on. One of the Darwin's Finches in the category of critically endangered is a Mangrove Finch. This was the first time with a Naturetrek group that we were able to record all species of these icons of evolution.

At the end of the hike along the arid zone a coral reef exposed to the air stopped us. The typical question “what is this?” ... In February 14th, 1954 a tectonic event pushed the crust up and then a 5 metre uplift occurred in just one night!

Charles Darwin was here in 1935, and he landed where we are going to land during the afternoon - Tagus Cove - a very peaceful place, here the geological landscape is so remarkable, with an extraordinary view point of the northern side of Isabela Island. Snorkelling with penguins, Flightless Cormorants, Galapagos Sea Lions and colourful fish once again made it a fabulous day...

Day 15

Monday 20th February

The island of Fernandina is another of the highlights on this archipelago. Marine Iguanas are everywhere - three thousand occupy this place and the sandy beach offers them a suitable nesting site. During the walk we saw how some males vigorously chase others from their territories.

This is the youngest of all the islands so there is no island like this that offers so dramatic a landscape - the volcanic activity is frequent, and about three years ago a period of two weeks of volcanic activity changed the topography of the south-western part of the coast.

After two hours walking we prepared for snorkelling activities. At this site personnel from the Charles Darwin Research Station are monitoring the impact caused by swimmers and snorkelers so we were advised to avoid using sun block. They believe a chemical component in sunscreen is killing the algae, which is the main source of food for marine iguanas.

We had lunch during our navigation towards Punta Vicente Roca on Isabela Island. Some people stayed on the sun deck during navigation and a blow hole was spotted by somebody, possibly a Bride's Whale. There was a large school of Common Dolphins as well and a few minutes before arriving, a huge fish appeared with the dorsal fin breaking the water surface, this was a *Mola mola*, or Ocean Sunfish.

During the panga ride all were impressed by the geological landscape, the erosion by wind, rain and the continuous whip of the powerful ocean carved the fragile lava in a strange manner, revealing the interior of the volcano - we saw clearly the way how springs of molten rock ascend to the surface following faults during collapses, and volcanic features called dikes. After an hour riding on the pangas, we started snorkelling and all agreed there is no place like this to see Green Sea Turtles.

Later during navigation we were briefed on the geological landscape we had seen – the theory is that this volcano collapsed more or less one hundred thousand years ago, amazingly half of the monument slid into the water, and geologists think this event created a mega seismic wave.

The captain told us to come to the bridge so Richard the bartender prepared some delicious cocktails once crossing the Equator. We had a chance to take pictures of the zero latitude on the GPS and as a great coincidence there was a marvellous sunset around the same time! Dinner was pleasant during our navigation around the northern coast of Isabela Island.

Day 16

Tuesday 21st February

We got here in the very early morning; Santiago Island is now our destination. Puerto Egas is a popular visitor site. Originally there was permission here by the current government to extract salt; certainly it was a very profitable activity. The salt miners were responsible for spoiling the ecological balance of this area. They had to abandon Santiago Island as soon the islands were declared a National Park and protected area. Ornithologists were fascinated with the variety of waders on the intertidal zone since the tide was quite low; plovers, sandpipers, sanderling, turnstones and others were recorded here. At the end of the hike along the intertidal zone, a small colony of Galapagos Fur Seals was searching for shade on lava tubes. It was almost ten in the morning and the sun was already very hot, so we all decided to return to the beach to start snorkelling or swimming from the beach.

We were back on board earlier now because we programmed a second snorkelling in Bartolome Island during the afternoon so we had to sail for about three hours, however weather conditions made us change our mind as the spring tide removed the sand on the sea bed so the visibility was only fair. Instead we decided to climb up to the highlands of this volcano. In order to make visit on this island easier the Galapagos National Park personnel have built a wooden trail all the way up to the summit of the volcano to avoid erosion caused by visitors on the very fragile volcanic ash. Once on the top the amazing volcanic landscape captured our attention, additionally the visibility allowed us to spot several islands around like Pinta, Marchena, North Seymour, Baltra, Santa Cruz, Bainbridge Rocks Chinese Hat Island, Santiago Rabida Pinzon, and even very far in the distance was Isabela Island (Sierra Negra Volcano).

We returned to the boat at 4pm to continue sailing towards North Seymour Island but on the way we approached Daphne Mayor Island. We circumnavigated the island where Peter and Rosemary Grant who are scientists have been studying Darwin's Finches for almost thirty years. During navigation a school of Bottle-nose Dolphins were following the wake of the boat and doing acrobatics. On departing earlier from Bartolome Island the idea was to stay anchored all night at North Seymour, and then we had a chance to start packing for the departure to mainland Ecuador the next day. It was so nice to see all the people reuniting during the last cocktail offered by the Captain and at the same time quite sad because we knew this great adventure was about to end.

Day 17

Wednesday 22nd February

The next day an extraordinary island was introduced to us - North Seymour. It is home to two species of frigate bird, Blue-footed Boobies, Swallow-tailed Gulls, Nazca Boobies and Land Iguanas, and in terms of plants a specialist is the endemic Palo Santo (*Bursera malacophylla*). After the early visit we returned to the boat for breakfast and prepared for the departure to the mainland where the crew helped us to transport our suitcases to the airport for checking in....

Day 18

Thursday 23rd February

Return flights to the UK

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!